

ASIA, [Myanmar](#) and [Israel](#) develop military pact

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INTRODUCTION:

Although allegations of a secret military partnership between [Myanmar](#) and [Israel](#) continue to be denied by both sides, reports suggest that [Israel](#) is aiding [Myanmar](#)'s military modernisation. William Ashton examines the commercial and strategic links between the two countries.

TEXT:

EVER SINCE the [Myanmar](#) armed forces (or Tatmadaw) formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, and took back direct control of the country, there have been persistent rumours throughout the Asia-Pacific region attesting to a secret military partnership developing between [Israel](#) and [Myanmar](#) (Burma). Despite repeated denials by Israeli officials in Yangon, Bangkok and [Singapore](#), reports continue to surface that [Israel](#) is closely involved in the military regime's ambitious programme to expand and modernise [Myanmar](#)'s armed forces.

According to some of these reports, certain aspects of [Israel](#)'s current relationship with the Tatmadaw come close to assisting the military regime (known since November 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council -- SPDC) to retain its hold on power.

Military ties 1948-88

[Myanmar](#)'s military ties with [Israel](#) are long-standing.

[Israel](#) was one of the few countries to which [Myanmar](#) turned for assistance and advice after it regained its independence from the [UK](#) in 1948. As a former British mandate, [Israel](#) shared a certain identity with [Myanmar](#). It had similar administrative procedures, educational methods and public service organisation. The fledgling government of Prime Minister U Nu related closely to [Israel](#)'s attempts to build up a modern state from diverse peoples, with limited resources, surrounded by enemies, but united by a common religion. Both governments had strong socialist and democratic ideals. (At the Asian Socialist Conference held in Yangon in 1953, [Myanmar](#) and [Israel](#) were the only two countries in Asia in which a Socialist Party was in power.) Also attractive to Yangon was Tel Aviv's 'non-aligned' status in world affairs. For its part, [Israel](#), threatened on all sides by Arab countries, was anxious to find allies who could provide diplomatic support in international forums like the UN.

Close bilateral ties had developed by the mid-1950s. While Myanmar was keen to obtain Israeli advice and technical assistance in areas like agriculture and construction, its initial interest centred on [Israel](#)'s armed forces.

In 1954 a military mission from [Myanmar](#) visited [Israel](#) to study the most suitable structure for a national defence force that utilised reserve forces. In particular, the delegation looked at [Israel](#)'s national service scheme, with a view to its introduction into [Myanmar](#). That did not occur but, during a visit to [Israel](#) the following year, Prime Minister U Nu took a great interest in the kibbutz system of self-defended frontier settlements. Four villages modelled on this system were later built in the Shan State, west of the Salween River, about 200km from the sensitive Chinese border. The Pyu Saw Hti town and village defence scheme (introduced in 1955) also borrowed several features from the defence of collective settlements in [Israel](#). This scheme later evolved into the People's Militia. [Myanmar](#) copied the structure of the Israeli women's

auxiliary force, and the Defence Services Institute, an independent commercial organisation run by the Tatmadaw to supplement the official defence budget, established a number of joint projects in [Myanmar](#) with Israeli construction and housing companies.

Other military links between the two countries were more direct. During the mid-1950s, for example, [Israel](#) sold [Myanmar](#) 30 second-hand Supermarine Spitfire fighters with related equipment, machine gun ammunition, bombs, rockets and spare engine parts. [Israel](#)'s Air Force also trained (in [Israel](#)) six [Myanmar Air Force](#) pilots in the operation of these aircraft and sent a technical team to [Myanmar](#) to show [Myanmar Air Force](#) mechanics how to maintain them. [Israel](#) also sent officers and materiel to [Myanmar](#) to help modernise the Myanmar Army. It is believed that some of the training courses provided by [Israel](#) covered aspects of military intelligence. So close was the relationship that, in 1958, Israeli Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces Major General Moshe Dayan and Director General of the Defence Ministry Shimon Peres visited [Myanmar](#). The following year General Ne Win paid an official visit to [Israel](#), both as prime minister of [Myanmar](#)'s 'caretaker' government and as chief of the country's defence forces.

Despite these contacts, bilateral ties declined significantly under the Revolutionary Government which seized power in Yangon in 1962. They further diminished after 1974, as Ne Win's ostensibly civilian Burma Socialist Programme Party government continued to shun most contacts with the outside world. Because of its earlier defence assistance, however, [Israel](#) enjoyed a special place in the minds of [Myanmar](#)'s top military leaders and modest links were maintained during this period.

Assistance to SLORC 1988-97

After the Tatmadaw took back the government of [Myanmar](#) in 1988, it was fiercely condemned by many countries and faced strong sanctions from its traditional arms suppliers, including the [UK](#) and [USA](#). This posed severe problems for the SLORC, which not only feared further urban unrest and an upsurge of insurgent activity in the countryside, but possibly even an invasion by the Western democracies in support of [Myanmar](#)'s burgeoning democracy movement. Also, over the longer term, the new regime wished to introduce a massive military expansion/modernisation programme.

In order to replenish [Myanmar](#)'s dwindling military supplies, the SLORC turned first to [Singapore](#) and [Pakistan](#). It later developed very close ties with [China](#). The SLORC also actively sought to develop military links with other countries, such as [Yugoslavia](#), [Poland](#) and [Russia](#). These countries were prepared (often secretly) to assist with supplies of arms and military equipment. It would appear that [Israel](#) should be counted among this latter group.

The first arms shipment [Myanmar](#) received after the 1988 takeover was from [Singapore](#). The second, which arrived by sea in August 1989, was a diverse collection of weapons and ammunition from [Belgium](#) and [Israel](#). Arranged through a newly-formed joint venture between [Myanmar](#) and [Singapore](#), this weapons shipment reportedly included second-hand 40mm RPG-2 grenade launchers and 57mm anti-tank guns of Eastern bloc origin. It has been suggested that this equipment may have been taken from Palestinian stocks captured in southern [Lebanon](#) by [Israel](#) in 1982, and re-sold to [Myanmar](#).

Since then, there have been several other reports that [Israel](#) has transferred arms and weapons technology to the Tatmadaw. In 1991, for example, an Israeli team visited [Myanmar](#), apparently to sell the military regime 9mm Uzi sub-machine guns. Weapons of this kind were subsequently observed on issue to the bodyguards who provided close protection to the members of the SLORC, and who now surround senior members of the SPDC when they venture out in public. There have also been unconfirmed reports that the army may have tried to develop an indigenous version of this weapon, to be known as the BA-94. If these reports are true, the effort does not seem to have amounted to much, but [Myanmar](#) has clearly had greater success in drawing on Israeli expertise in its efforts to develop a whole new family of 5.56mm infantry weapons. The MA (Myanmar Army) series of assault rifles and light machine guns, for example, which is now in serial production at a closely guarded factory in central [Myanmar](#), appears to include several elements of the Israeli 5.56mm Galil assault rifle.

Other military developments in [Myanmar](#) have sparked additional rumours in Yangon, and consequent reports in the media. Although difficult to prove, many observers believe that at different times, the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad has provided training, technical advice and other forms of assistance to [Myanmar](#)'s powerful Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence which is responsible for both internal security and support for military operations. As the SLORC progressively upgraded [Myanmar](#)'s military communications network, including its signals intelligence capabilities, more stories surfaced about possible Israeli involvement. It has been suggested, for example, that [Israel](#) and [Singapore](#) have provided the Myanmar Army with specialised intercept and encryption equipment, with training packages. Also, the Israeli Army -- or perhaps ex-Israeli Army specialists -- has reportedly provided training to [Myanmar](#)'s elite counter-terrorist squad.

These reports of arms sales, technology transfers and other ties to the military regime in Yangon have been repeatedly and strenuously denied by official Israeli representatives in the region. They have pointed out that most of the accusations levelled at [Israel](#) since 1988 have been based on unsubstantiated rumours, speculation in the international news media, and purely circumstantial evidence. Since the Yangon regime re-invented itself as the SPDC in late 1997, however, military contacts between the two countries have become harder to deny. Whether or not these earlier contacts took place, it is now clear that all three arms of the Tatmadaw are receiving direct help from Israeli companies. Given its sensitive nature, it is difficult to see how this assistance could be given to [Myanmar](#) without the active involvement, or at least the full knowledge and support, of the Israeli government.

Links to the SPDC 1997-2000

In August 1997 it was revealed that the Israeli defence manufacturing company Elbit had won a contract to upgrade [Myanmar](#)'s (then) three squadrons of Chinese-built F-7 fighters and FT-7 trainers. The F-7 is a derivative of the Mikoyan MiG-21 'Fishbed' jet fighter. The FT-7 is the export version of the GAIC JJ-7, itself a copy of the MiG-21 'Mongol-B' trainer. Since they began to be delivered by [China](#) in 1991, the [Myanmar Air Force](#) has progressively acquired about 54 (or four squadrons) of these aircraft, the latest arriving at Hmawbi air base only last year. In related sales, the air force has also acquired about 350 PL-2A air-to-air missiles (AAM) from [China](#) and at least one shipment of the more sophisticated PL-5 AAMs.

Since their delivery to [Myanmar](#), these new aircraft have caused the air force considerable problems. Several aircraft (and pilots) have already been lost through accidents, raising questions about the reliability of the Chinese technology. There have also been reliable reports that the F-7s were delivered without the computer software to permit the AAMs to be fired in flight. Also, the air force has complained that the F-7s are difficult to maintain, in part reflecting major differences between the structure and underlying philosophy of the [Myanmar](#) and Chinese logistics systems. Spare parts have been in very short supply. In addition, the air force seems to have experienced difficulties in using the F-7 (designed primarily for air defence) in a ground attack role. These, and other problems, seem to have prompted the air force to turn to [Israel](#) for assistance.

According to sources in the international arms market, 36 of [Myanmar](#)'s F-7 fighters are to be retro-fitted with the Elta EL/M-2032 air-to-air radar, Rafael Python 3 infrared, short range AAMs, and Litening laser designator pods. The same equipment will also be installed on the two-seater FT-7 fighter trainers. In a related deal, [Israel](#) will also sell [Myanmar](#) at least one consignment of laser-guided bombs. Since the Elbit contract was won in 1997, the air force has acquired at least one more squadron of F-7 and FT-7 aircraft from [China](#), but it is not known whether the Israeli-backed upgrade programme will now be extended to include the additional aircraft. [Myanmar](#)'s critical shortage of foreign exchange will be a major factor in the SPDC's decision.

The army has also benefited from [Myanmar](#)'s new closeness to [Israel](#).

As part of the regime's massive military modernisation and expansion programme, considerable effort has been put into upgrading the army's artillery capabilities. In keeping with its practice of never abandoning

any equipment of value, the army clearly still aims, as far as possible, to keep older weapons operational. ([Pakistan](#), for example, has recently provided [Myanmar](#) with ammunition for its vintage 25 pounder field guns). The older [UK](#), US and Yugoslav guns in the Tatmadaw's inventory have been supplemented over the past 10 years with a range of new towed and self-propelled artillery pieces. Purchased mainly from [China](#), they include 122mm howitzers, anti-tank guns, 57mm Type 80 anti-aircraft guns, 37mm Type 74 anti-aircraft guns and 107mm Type 63 multiple rocket launchers. In a barter deal brokered by [China](#) last year, the SPDC has also managed to acquire about 16 130mm artillery pieces from [North Korea](#). Despite all this new firepower, however, the army has still looked to [Israel](#) to help equip its new artillery battalions.

Around 1998 [Myanmar](#) negotiated the purchase of 16 155mm Soltam towed howitzers, possibly through a third party like [Singapore](#). These guns are believed to be second-hand pieces no longer required by the Israel Defence Force. Last year, ammunition for these guns (including high explosive and white phosphorous rounds) was ordered from Pakistan's government ordnance factories. Before the purchase of these new Chinese and North Korean weapons, [Myanmar](#)'s largest artillery pieces were 105mm medium guns, provided by the [USA](#) almost 40 years ago. Acquiring the Israeli weapons thus marks a major capability leap for [Myanmar](#)'s army gunners. It is possible that either [Israel](#) or [Pakistan](#) has provided instructors to help the army learn to use and maintain these new weapons.

Nor has the Myanmar Navy missed out on Israeli assistance. There have been several reports that [Israel](#) is playing a crucial role in the construction and fitting out of three new warships, currently being built in Yangon.

[Myanmar](#)'s military leaders have long wanted to acquire two or three frigates to replace the country's obsolete PCE-827 and Admirable-class corvettes, decommissioned in 1994, and its two 1960s-vintage Nawarat-class corvettes, which have been gradually phased out since 1989. As military ties with [China](#) rapidly grew during the 1990s, the SLORC hoped to buy two or three Jiangnan- or even Jianghu-class frigates, but it could not afford even the special 'friendship' prices being asked by Beijing. As a compromise, the SPDC has now purchased three Chinese hulls, and is currently fitting them out as corvettes in Yangon's Sinmalaik shipyard.

According to reliable reports, the three vessels will each be about 75m long and displace about 1,200 tons. Despite a European Community embargo against arms sales to [Myanmar](#), the ships' main guns are being imported (apparently through a third party) from [Italy](#). Based on the information currently available, they are likely to be 76mm OTO Melara Compact guns, weapons which (perhaps coincidentally) have been extensively combat-tested by the Israeli Navy on its Reshef-class fast attack missile patrol boats. The corvettes will probably also be fitted with anti-submarine weapons, but it is not known what, if any, surface-to-surface and SAMs the ships will carry.

[Israel](#)'s main role in fitting out the three corvettes is apparently to provide their electronics suites. Details of the full contract are not known, but it is expected that each package will include at least a surface-search radar, a fire-control radar, a navigation radar and a hull-mounted sonar.

The first of these warships will probably be commissioned and commence sea trials later this year.

Only sales or a strategic imperative?

While Myanmar remains a pariah state, subject to comprehensive sanctions by the [USA](#) and European Community, it is unlikely that [Israel](#) will ever admit publicly to having military links with the Tatmadaw. Until it does, the reasons for [Israel](#)'s secret partnership with the Yangon regime will remain unclear. A number of factors, however, have probably played a part in influencing policy decisions in Tel Aviv.

There is clearly a strong commercial imperative behind some of these ventures. From a regional base in [Singapore](#), with which it shares a very close relationship, [Israel](#) has already managed to penetrate the lucrative Chinese arms market. It is now aggressively seeking new targets for sales of weapons and military

equipment in the Asia-Pacific. These sales are sometimes supported by offers of technology transfers and specialised advice. This approach has led to fears among some countries that [Israel](#) will introduce new military capabilities into the region which could encourage a mini arms race, as others attempt to catch up. The weapon systems being provided to the [Myanmar](#) armed forces are not that new, and the Asian economic crisis has dramatically reduced the purchasing power of many regional countries, but [Israel's](#) current activities in [Myanmar](#) will add to those concerns.

Given the nature of some of these sales, and other probable forms of military assistance to [Myanmar](#), these initiatives would appear to enjoy the strong support of the Israeli government. In addition to the ever-present trade imperative, one reason for this support could be a calculation by senior Israeli officials that closer ties to [Myanmar](#) could reap diplomatic and intelligence dividends. For example, [Myanmar](#) is now a full member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) which, despite the economic crisis, is still a major force in a part of the world which has received much closer attention from strategic analysts since the end of the Cold War. [Israel's](#) regional base will remain [Singapore](#), but it is possible that Tel Aviv believes [Myanmar](#) can provide another avenue for influence in ASEAN, and a useful vantage point from which to monitor critical strategic developments in places like [China](#) and [India](#).

In particular, [Israel](#) is interested in the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the transfer of technologies related to the development of ballistic and other missiles. [Myanmar](#) has close military relations with [China](#) and [Pakistan](#), both of which have been accused of transferring sensitive weapons technologies to rogue Islamic states, such as [Iran](#). [Myanmar](#) is also a neighbour of [India](#), another nuclear power that has resisted international pressure to curb its proliferation activities. Yangon could thus be seen by [Israel](#) as a useful listening post from which to monitor and report on these countries.

Also, despite accusations over the years that [Myanmar](#) has developed chemical and biological weapons, and more convincing arguments that [Israel](#) has a sizeable nuclear arsenal of its own, both countries share an interest in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. [Myanmar's](#) support for anti-proliferation initiatives, in multilateral forums like the UN General Assembly and the Committee on Disarmament, would seem to be worth a modest investment by the Israeli government in bilateral relations with the SPDC. In addition to training [Myanmar](#) agriculturalists in [Israel](#), assisting the Tatmadaw to upgrade its military capabilities seems a sure way of getting close to the Yangon regime.

[Israel's](#) repeated denial of any military links with [Myanmar](#) are not unexpected. [Israel](#) has never liked advertising such ties, particularly with countries like [Myanmar](#), [South Africa](#) and [China](#), which have been condemned by the international community for gross abuses of human rights. Even [Israel's](#) very close military ties with [Singapore](#) are routinely denied by both sides. Yet there seems little room for doubt that, after the 1988 takeover, [Israel](#) did start to develop close links with the SLORC, which are continuing to grow under the SPDC. In these circumstances, it would be surprising if [Israel](#) was not still looking for opportunities to restore the kind of mutually beneficial bilateral relationship that was first established when both countries became independent modern states in 1948.

Pro-democracy

CAPTION:

Pro-democracy campaigners protest against the [Myanmar](#) military dictatorship. As Myanmar remains very much a pariah state within the international community, any commercial and strategic links between [Israel](#) and the Yangon regime are likely to remain secret. *PA News/0070265*

Exiled Myanmar...

CAPTION:

Exiled Myanmar students call for the international community to take action against the military regime in [Myanmar](#). However, the commercial and strategic benefits of developing a secret alliance with the military junta are likely to weigh heavily against their calls. *PA News/0070266*

In order to reduce...

CAPTION:

In order to reduce the costs of military imports, [Myanmar](#) has modified vehicles for military purposes. These include the Special Combat Vehicle. *Bruce Hawke/0039362*

In order to reduce...

In order to reduce the costs of military imports, [Myanmar](#) has modified vehicles for military purposes. These include the Armoured Fighting Car. *Bruce Hawke/0039363*

[Myanmar](#) is now...

CAPTION:

[Myanmar](#) is now a full member of ASEAN. Myanmar Prime Minister Than Shwe (far left) joined other heads of state at the 3rd ASEAN Informal Summit last November. *PA News/0070267*